DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 934 JC 890 294

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TITLE Reflections at Mid-Career: Commitments and the Classroom.
INSTITUTION Princeton Univ., NJ. Mid-Career Fellowship Program.
PUB DATE May 89
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication; *Classroom Environment; Classroom Techniques; *College Faculty; College Instruction; Community Colleges; *Learning Processes; Learning Readiness; Student Development; Student Responsibility; Teacher Guidance; Teacher Responsibility; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching (Occupation); Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

A prerequisite for learning is admitting simply that one "does not know." In order to discover and truly "know," one must have an open mind, suspend all preconceptions and assumptions, and be able to tolerate the ambiguity experienced when the line between formal subject matter and those assumptions begins to blur. Many community college students make sharp distinctions between their coursework and their lives outside of college. They have been led to believe that they possess no power or control in the classroom, and therefore often fail to take responsibility for their own learning. Encouraging students to take responsibility for their classroom experience requires faculty members to relinquish authority and open up a space for students to exercise their rights as learners. Only after students recognize the presence of ambiguity in the teaching-learning process can active learning, or discovery, take place. Ambiguity in the classroom may cause anxiety for some students, especially among community college students who tend to have lower skill development and less self-confidence. Some may draw back from the risks involved in determining for themselves which of several interpretations carries more weight. But others will begin to experience new ideas, question their beliefs, take chances by speaking their minds, and, in so doing, will become stronger thinkers and learners. These reflections are offered in the context of one individual's personal account of his decision to become and remain a community college sociology teacher. (ALB)

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REFLECTIONS AT MID-CAREER:

COMMITMENTS AND THE CLASSROOM

May 1989

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I was twenty-five years of age when I began teaching at Middlesex County College in the fall of 1971. I was in the second year of my marriage, third year of graduate school and my first child was six months old. I was completing the coursework for my Ph.D. in sociology at The New School For Social Research in New York City. I had taken the job out of desperation in June of that year because my sole means of support in grad school had been my wife and she was now staying home with our child. I felt I was not ready to work full time and attend grad school simultaneously.

I envisioned my stay at Middlesex County College to be a stopover until I received my Ph.D. and went onwards to where I thought I should be teaching. That would be at a prestigious four year school. Yet I felt my stay at Middlesex would have some short term benefits. I would be learning how to teach, acquiring a few years of experience and we needed the money. My commitment to the educational process at the Community College was weak compared to my commit ments at graduate school. Even more significant than that was my vision of higher education did not match my experience at Middlesex. To me the Community College was a hybrid phenomenon, not quite college, not quite high school. It was an in-between place for the students and for me.

I had heard about Middlesex from a friend at the New School. He had a friend who worked there. I heard second hand stories about people who worked there and their

students for two years before I began to work there. They were chilling stories of administrators who were unreasonable, of students who were unconcerned about learning, of inferior classroom facilities, and offices for faculty that were once barracks for enlisted men who worked at the facility there once known as the Raritan Arsenal.

I went for my interview on June 6, 1971 and I was hired on June 6, 1971. On the one hand I was relieved because I felt that since I was only teaching at a two-year school not much would be demanded from me. This would leave me free to pursue my Ph.D. and have some time left over for my family. I was mistaken. After a year of teaching I began to teach extra courses at night and in the summer. I was teaching sixteen courses a year. My graduate work suffered and my family life was disintigrating. By the fall of 1973 I had begun to write my dissertation and I had lost my drive and passion. In October of that year I took a leave from graduate school, my dreams of teaching at a four year school were put on hold. It appeared that I was going to be a teacher at Middlesex College for some time.

It was then that I realized that my dreams of researching and teaching at a prestigious school were going to have to be given up. I was in despair over the long range possibilities. I started to notice more clearly where I was and what was going on around me. Who were these people? What were they doing and how did I fit in here, if at all? What

would it take for me to really get involved as a faculty member and most importantly what kind of teacher was it possible for me to become? Was there a difference in teaching at a community colege? How was I going to deal with the issues of status and shame?

Certainly the path to becoming a community college teacher was not the same for everybody. As I took a closer and closer look around me I realized that my particular set of circumstances were somewhat unique. Most of my colleagues had actively chosen to teach at Middlesex College. I knew I also had to choose. I knew that complaining about my situation was counter productive and useless. I then entered into a period of reevaluationg my goals. What eventually became clear was that the students at Middlesex had enormous potential, that the working conditions were acceptable and that my first two and a half years had been exciting and enjoyable. My decision was that I was going to learn how to be a good teacher and make a total commitment to the classroom as the arena of my expertise.

This process was the really difficult part of my eighteen years of teaching. It is continuous and requires continual introspection as well as maintaining dialogues with colleagues. I have had crises at work along those years but never anything as intense as that first real hard look at whether or not I wanted to teach at a community college. This is the condition of my freedom and the antidote to the

social shame and status considerations one may have about teaching at a community college. It is a matter of choice and passion, as worthy a task as any other.

It is the experience of being in the classroom, full of students, engaging them and spending a semester with them, that is the essence of the community college teacher. It is there that our capacities are expressed and the limitations of our situation have to be confronted. It is to that arena that I turn to now.

Ambiguity, Freedom and Responsibility-The Context For The Possibility of Learning.

My experiences as a teacher have taught me that there is no surety to the results of teaching. The variables upon which "success" occurrs are clearly obscure. The very notion of "success" is unclear, once you dispense with the agreement that "success" is the same thing as grades. Although I teach various courses within the discipline of sociology I have always thought that there was an implicit agenda to the classroom. An agenda which opens up an opportunity for my students to enter into the realm where discovery becomes a possibility. Discovery is the essence of learning. Without the presence of the attitude which allows discovery, the classroom becomes a barren excercise.

Discovery becomes a possibility when one is able to admit clearly to oneself that one "does not know" and is able to tolerate that state. In order to not know one must suspend the taken for granted assumptions one has about everything. Now everything may be too inclusive a term but within the domain of a sociology class we can delimit that to what one believes about the social world. In the attempt to set a stage for the student to become an active learner, other issues emerge. Issues such as who the student is as a person. Those issues begin showing up because the line between the formal subject matter and the everyday assumptions and knowledge about the world begin to get mixed.

It is in this mixing that an aspect of ambiguity begins to be experienced. Most of my students make sharp distinctions between their lives at college and their lives outside of college. While they may, for the most part, accept the rationale that enrichment in and of itself is worthwhile, my students are hungry to get on with their lives. They see school as an interruption in that process. I try to show them it is not and that for them to make such a powerful distinction means they are not being responsible. Somehow if they see school as separate they feel legitimate in making the claim that different rules apply. This false sense of freedom erodes their commitment and capacity to take themselves seriously as learners. The implicit agenda emerges here. The question for me is not one of manipulation or tactics. It is a question of how do I authenticaly represent to my students the possibility there is for them as learners? They are not familiar with discovery, they do not appreciate ambiguity (and for good reason, after all who does?) and most of them feel somewhat mechanically linked to the machinations of the classroom structure. The subject matter of sociology becomes less important than who my students are as persons and while I am not concerned with transforming them as persons, I am concerned with how they operate in the classroom. In this sense because I do not separate who they are in the classroom from who they are outside of the classroom you

might say that I am engaged in transformative tactics. Yet I believe I only hold out possibilities and it is an option for them to pick up on, not a requirement for a grade. If I am able to create an atomosphere where students feel that their learning is their own responsibility they then must ask seriously "what is the purpose of the classroom and in what ways can I define that purpose?" This is ambiguous because it calls into question their belief that the classroom is the domain of the power of the teacher and that all acts in the classroom are an aspect of that power. I have at times forgotten this. When the years seem to merge one on top of the other, when the faces appear indistinct, when I start counting the days until the end of the semester, then I forget whose classroom it really is. Combined with the students apparent acquiesence the classroom wrongly takes on the appearance of a tribute to me and my "teaching abilities". When this begins to happen I step back and reassess what is going on. It is then, in the struggle to avoid ambiguity that my responsibility as a teacher becomes evident. I must not allow my needs to take precedence over the needs of my students and I must not forget that as a faculty member my freedom to operate in the classroom (which becomes most evident as an element of the authority I wield) must necessarily be severely limited by the space I must open up for my students to excercise their rights as learners.

The presence of ambiguity, which is necessary for my students to recognize their freedom and responsibility, becomes a deficit for me as a teacher. Although I recognize the equivical nature of both knowledge and the classroom dynamic, it is not productive to use either as a reason why teaching-learning cannot occur or to appear as one who is able to solve all mental disputes. In these examples the act of teaching-learning becomes secondary to the faculty's need to experience power.

The paradox is really very circular. In order to teach effectively I must present my students with the fact that the classroom is really theirs. They need to know the degree to which the discipline of sociology is riddled with ambiguities and that in the same way so is the teaching-learning experience. Within this context students need to feel secure enough that there is the possibility of determining that one interpretation carries more weight than others. It also is helpful if they are able to make judgements on their own about which interpretations do make more sense and why. Once they "get" some of this, their anxieties do increase. One response I have noticed to anxiety, is to latch onto a seemingly coherent bit of knowledge and perceive the whole course in terms of a narrow idea. Another response which becomes particularly evident when students are writing papers, is for students to write the paper in their heads before they do any research. There is no discovery in that process. Of course there is denial, and sleeping and cutting and cynicism.

I take these to be authentic responses within the domain of the classroom. They are significant because they suggest a nerve has been touched or something has gotten through and the student is engaging in a public expression. Their intention to communicate their discomfort is the beginning of their intention to learn. It is at this point, when the ambiguities are high, that the student has a range of choices about how to deal with both the classroom material and his own response. A strong response is to remain at the edge of the seat and participate. A weak response is to withdraw. In the face of new ideas and knowledge, in the thin line between the classroom and everyday life, when the student has the opportunity to shift perspectives and see themselves as actors, egos and persons, that is the stage where learning can occur.

It can occur there because the tension which exists as a result of our collective efforts leaves little middle ground. I have seen students who have begun the course with little or no interest in the subject matter. They do not define themselves as learners or as being capable of learning. I have seen them become involved because they made a choice to engage the issues. They begin to experience a mixing of ideas, they begin to question what they believe in, they start to take chances by speaking out and speaking their minds. In the process of publicly risking their thoughts they become stronger as thinkers and learners.

While it is important for them to learn aspects of the body of knowledge called sociology, equally important is they learn that they are able to learn and able to tolerate the anxieties and ambiguities of that process.

I believe that this process cannot take place in large lecture halls or with teachers who are extremely rigid in their viewpoints. Students at the community college need a bit more nurturing and challenging than students at four year schools. The community college student has lower skill levels and their self-confidence in the area of academics is less developed. Rather than reducing their anxieties through making the classroom an intellectually comfortable place I attempt to make my classroom a comfortable place on authority levels. I am available to my students for whatever they legitimately need. I handle all of their questions, comments and inquiries with total seriousness. As I represent to them my attitudes about and my beliefs in the process of teaching-learning, they begin to be able to play in that arena.

After all a semester is not that long a period of time. One can only do so much. If I lose my sense of perspective and feel the need to drive my students harder and harder, it is only because I have begun to doubt my own worth. This all becomes then an excercise in reconfirming that the occupation I am engaged in has a wider meaning beyond the paycheck.This is when I am at my worst. I am at my best when

in common discourse there arises total participation, involvement and searching, when the class ends and it seems no one wants to leave, when the discussion is unfinished and they want the issues to be resolved and it has been enough to open it all up.

When the semester is over and the last class has filed out, I usually sit for a while alone in an empty classroom. I stare at the empty chairs, I move around the room, I stare at the board. I hear their voices, I see them sitting in a juxtaposed all semester collage, after a few minutes the internal din quiets and I too leave the space of the semester.

I am always sad at the end of the semester. I can never quite reconcile the gnawing sense that I have not done enough. I am also proud of my students, the one's who persevered and struggled with their limitations as I did with mine, the ones who left with more than they came with. It is then that I declare internally that the semester is complete but never really finished for me or for them.

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JUL 28 1989